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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the attitudes of pre-service and in-service teachers toward children of divorced parents. More specifically, it sought to determine whether children from single parent families were perceived by teachers as potential personality and behavior problems in the classroom. Subjects of the study were 45 pre-service and 45 in-service teachers. The subjects were asked to view a videotape of a child interacting in the naturalistic conditions of a classroom and assess her personality traits and predict her behavior in school. One group of subjects was told that the child was from a single parent family, one group that she was from an intact family, and a third group received no information on her family status. An analysis of the findings indicated that there were some differences of perceptions of the child between the groups. It was tentatively concluded that, regardless of their level of training, teachers believed children's behavior is in some way related to their notion of the structure of the child's family. Four data tables are included. (JD)

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"An Investigation of Perceived Attitudes of Pre-Service and In-Service Teachers Concerning Children from Non-Traditional Families"

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An Investigation of Perceived Attitudes of Pre-Service and In-Service Teachers Concerning Children from Non-Traditional Families

A. Statement of the Problem:

The purpose of this research is to investigate possible perceptual differences of in-service teachers toward children with regard to family type as compared with pre-service teachers. More specifically, do in-service and pre-service teachers perceive children from single parent families as potential personality and behavior problems in the classroom.

For generations, the traditional family has been considered the most desirable unit for rearing children. In the past decade family structure has undergone drastic changes. With the increasing rate of divorce in this country, the number of children being reared in single parent families has shown a dramatic increase. The latest Bureau of the Census found that eighteen percent of all children 0-18 years-old are presently residing with single parents (Allers, 1982). Weiss (1979) contends that for every two chldren who are now infants, one will, before reaching the age of eighteen, live in a one-parent household.

These rapid changes taking place within the family structure have been responsible for posing questions concerning what, if any, relationship exists between family structure and the child's behavior, personality and achievement in the classroom and what important issues educators must address in order to meet the special needs of these children.

Related Research:

In general, non-traditional families have been viewed negatively by society. In a study by Visher & Visher (1979), non-nuclear families were found

to be viewed as second class citizens, and faced discrimination by various instutions, including schools. McFall (1974) contends that society in general and schools in particular need to re-examine their attitudes toward single parent families. A study by Santrock (1978) emphasized the potential harm teacher attitudes can have on the children from non-nuclear families. He further contends that teachers view the children's behavior from single parent homes more negatively than the same behavior of children from nuclear families. Ellison (1979) found in a study that teachers rated children from single parent homes as being more academically disabled than children from two-parent homes.

While research studies have pointed out the negative effects of the single parent home on the child's behavior, personality and academic success (Stolberg, 1973; Blanchard & Biller, 1971; Sciara & Jantz, 1974), other studies (Landis, 1960; Hetherington, 1978) have found a positive one-parent environment to be a better contributing factor toward the child's development than a conflict-ridden intact family. Further, in a review of the father absence literature, Herzog and Sudia (1970) concluded that father absence alone was not the primary indicator of poor academic achievement, if other varibles such as socio-economic level and type of father absence were controlled. It would appear that educators need to review the attitudes long held that children from single parent homes automatically have more problems socially, behaviorally and academically than children from nuclear families (National Committee, 1979).

Research has presented conflicting views concerning teachers' perceptions of behavioral differences between children from varied family status. Studies have shown that stressful situations encountered in single

parent families adversely affects the children (NAESP Report, 1980; Randall, 1981), while a study by Hammond (1979) pointed out that educators should not be so quick in making this type of generalization. This lack of understanding can best be displaced by improving teacher competencies in working with non-traditional families though increased training experiences in preservice and inservice programs. Stallworth and Williams (1981) stress that undergraduate teacher preparation programs should emphasize experiences which establish an awareness of family dynamics as well as an understanding of the psychological needs of children which have resulted from their environment (i.e., family, school and community).

Results of studies (Drake, 1981; Stallworth & Williams, 1981; Gay, 1981) have identified several areas which teacher training institutions should address in preparing teachers to understand and meet the needs of students from single parent families. Among these are more psychology and child development courses, pre-service work in parent involvement, and special training in dealing with non-nuclear families. Many reasons have been offered to explain why teacher training institutions have failed to adequately prepare teachers to meet the challenge of establishing a more positive home/school relationship within the total realm of family structures (Visher & Visher, 1979; Damon, 1979; Johnson, 1981). Reasons such as the lack of awareness concerning non-nuclear families on the part of professors, limited professional resources and literature available for use by professors, and lack of quality information about single-parent families are but a few examples. Further, teacher trainers and trainees hesitate to deal with emotional and societal issues such as divorce and remarriage, citing these as social concerns and believing that concentration should be on training

teachers toward obtaining more achievable tasks in the classroom.

Professionals in the field cite some of the same ambivalent feelings concerning the importance given to non-traditional family structures (Visher & Visher, 1979; Parks, 1981; Ricci, 1979). A study by Hogan (1982) found that in-service teachers were unsure of their ability to meet the needs of students from single-parent families. Research has shown that not only do teachers have problems working with different family structures, but schools too have found problems associated with non-nuclear families. Results of studies (Ricci, 1979; Parks, 1981) indicated problems concerning the legal issues in child custody, an unwillingness to acknowledge divorce and remarriage openly for fear it would withdraw support for the ideal one-family home, and budget problems within the schools which leave little money to provide the additional staff and materials necessary to meet the communication needs for separate households.

While the vast majority of curriculum studies, policies and procedures are geared toward the traditional family, teacher training institutions and schools have a responsibility to understand and relate to the changing family structures (Ricci, 1979). It would be philosophically unsound for schools to ignore the needs of non-traditional family structures, while at the same time advocating society's intention to meet the needs of all children (Randall, 1981).

C. Objectives:

The main goal of this research was to document possible perceptual differences of in-service teachers toward children with regard to family type as compared with pre-service teachers. The present study investigated the possibility that teacher ratings of children may be directed toward a view

that children from single parent families will exhibit more negative traits in their personality and behavior than children from nuclear families.

D. Procedures and Methodology:

Subjects: The subjects were 45 undergraduate and 45 graduate students attending the University of Alabama at Birmingham. All of the subjects were students enrolled in teacher preparation courses or teachers employed in a teaching capacity. Demographic data was obtained from each student using an investigator developed research form. The undergraduate subjects were randomly assigned to one of three groups. One group was identified as the intact family group, one group as the divorced family group and the third group was the control group. The same procedures were followed for the graduate subjects.

Materials and Procedure: Subjects in each group were shown the same 20 minute videotape of a seven-year-old girl named Jane. The videotape depicted Jane in the classroom during peer interaction.

The following written information was given to each of the groups:

"This study deals with the effects of divorce on the personality and social development of children. Despite the fact that divorce is becoming commonplace in our society, very little is known about its actual impact on the child. Previous studies have used objective measures to assess these traits on the developing child. It is unclear whether this type of measure can adequately measure features of the child's normal, everyday behavior in the classroom.

The present study is designed to examine the effects of divorce by looking at the normal, everyday behavior of children under naturalistic conditions in the classroom. What we want to see is whether teachers, working independently of each other, can agree reasonably well on the ratings of a child's personality based on seeing a short video tape of the child's behavior. We have obtained videotapes of children interacting with other children in a

classroom situation. Half of our tapes focus on children from divorced homes; the other half depict children from intact (non-divorced) homes. What we want you to do today is to view this child and rate him/her on several personality traits.

(At this point, different written information, stated below, was given to the subjects according to their assigned groups. This strategy was employed in order to test the assumption that a preconceived attitude exists on the part of pre/in-service teachers concerning children from divorced homes.)

Subjects in the intact home group read:

"The child you are about to see is from an intact home and is named Jane. She is seven-years-old and is in the 1st grade. She is living with her mother, father, and brother."

Subjects in the divorced group read:

"The child you are about to see is from a divorced home and is named Jane. She is seven-years-old and is in the 1st grade. Her father and mother were divorced about four years ago and she now lives with her mother and brother. The extent of Jane's contact with her father is not known to us."

Subjects in the control group read:

"The child you are about to see is named Jane. She is seven-years-old and is in the first grade. Please view the video tape and attend carefully to Jane's interaction in the classroom."

After reading the instructions, the subjects were asked if they had any questions. If not, the investigator started the tape and pointed out the child named Jane. The subjects were told to attend carefully to her so that they could subsequently rate her personality. After the subjects had viewed the tape, the investigator handed the subjects two investigator developed rating scales--

one entitled the "Personality Trait Rating Scale," and the other labeled "Predicted Behavior in School."

"The Personality Trait Rating Scale" was completed first. The subjects were asked to rate Jane on a 1-9 scale (1 being very low, 9 being very high) for the following personality traits: Happiness, Gets Along with Others, Need for Achievement, Introversion, Emotional Adjustment, Morality, Anxiety, Aggression, Deviance, and Sex Role Adjustment.

On the "Predicted Behavior in School" sheet, the subjects were asked to think about how Jane might be expected to act in school. Jane's school behavior was rated on a 1-9 scale for the following items: "How much is she likely to break school rules and regulations"? (very unlikely to very likely); "How well do you think she would cope with stressful situations at school?" (cope very well to cope very poorly): "To what extent do you feel she would be cooperative with teachers at school?" (very cooperative to very uncooperative); "How popular to you think she would be with her classmates at school?" (very popular to very unpopular); "Is she likely to assume leadership positions at school?" (very likely to very unlikely); and, "To what extent is she the type of child to be left in the classroom and feel sure that she would still continue to do her work and follow your directions of what the class should do while you are gone?" (very likely to very unlikely).

Careful attention was given to scheduling videotape viewing times in order to minimize the opportunity for the subjects to discuss the experiment with each other. At the end of the session, the subjects were asked not to discuss the experiment with their classmates.

At the completion of the session, the subjects were debriefed and informed about the actual format of the experiment; namely, "all subjects

viewed and assessed the same child." As part of the debriefing, the subjects were told that the study dealt with the negative attitudes and perceptions that in-service and pre-service teachers have toward children from single parent families.

Results and Findings

A 2 x 3 between subjects multivariate analysis of variance was performed on the dependent variables BEHAVE (Predicted Behavior in School) and PERSON (Personality Trait Rating Scale) and the independent variables TEACH (preservice, inservice) and STATUS (intact, divorced and control).

SPSS MANOVA (Norusis, 1985) was used for the analysis with the unique sums of squares, regression approach. Order of entry of the independent variables was TEACH, then STATUS. Total N=90 was reduced to 88 with the deletion of all outliers. These outliers were found at either end of histogram. No information was available to indicate why these teachers scored so extremely differently on the measures.

INSERT TABLE 1 about here

According to Pillais criterion, the dependent variable BEHAVE was significantly affected by the interaction of TEACH and STATUS $F(4,164)=2.68$, $p=.033$. The main effect STATUS was significant $F(4,164)=4.70$, $p=.001$. The results reflect a mild association between the perceived STATUS of the child's family and the level of teacher training, TEACH and the dependent variable BEHAVE, α =.12. The results reflect a moderate association as well for the main effect, STATUS, with the dependent variable, BEHAVE α =.21.

To investigate the effects of each main effect and interaction on the individual dependent variables, a stepdown analysis was performed. All dependent

variables were judged to be sufficiently reliable to warrant stepdown analysis. An experiment wise error rate of .05 was achieved by the apportionment of alpha as shown in the last column of TABLE 2 for each of the dependent variables.

INSERT TABLE 2 about here

A unique contribution to predicting differences among the perceived status of the child's family was made by the dependent variable BEHAVE, stepdown $F(2,82)=10.60$, $p=.0001$, $\alpha = .41$. Another unique contribution to predicting differences between teachers and the perceived status of the child's family was made by the dependent variable BEHAVE, stepdown $F(2,81)=4.08$, $p=.020$, $\alpha = .16$. No significant difference could be established in personality traits or behavior between teachers based on their skill level. Univariate analyses confirm the findings of the Roy Bargman stepdown procedure. BEHAVE was the locus of focus in the interaction of TEACH and STATUS, $F(1, 82)=4.76$, $p=.011$. BEHAVE was significantly affected by the perceived status of the child's family contributing to the teacher's perception of the behavior $F(2,82)=10.31$, $p=.0001$.

INSERT TABLE 3 about here

Teachers, regardless of their level of training, believe children's behavior is in someway related to their perceived notion of the structure of the child's family. Nonsignificance was demonstrated by personality traits. Caution must be exercised when evaluating these results due to small sample size. Practical significance was only moderate at best.

INSERT TABLE 4 about here

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics: IVs Teach and Status

IV	IV	M	SD	N
Teach	Status			
preservice				
	intact	56.333	7.374	15
	divorced	55.786	5.873	14
	control	53.067	5.873	15
inservice				
	intact	56.200	8.703	15
	divorced	55.133	6.728	15
	control	57.929	5.413	14
Total		55.716	6.743	88

TABLE 2

Descriptive Statistics: Tests of Status, Teach And Their Interaction

Independent variable	Dependent variable	univariate F	df	stepdown F	df	a
Status						
	BEHAVE	10.60493*	2,82	10.31380*	2,81	.025
	PERSON	.13381	2,82	.13381	2,82	.025
Teach						
	BEHAVE	1.00172	1,82	.80650	1,81	.025
	PERSON	.88302	1,82	.88302	1,82	.025
Interaction Status by Teach						
	Behave	4.76427*	2,82	4.08424*	2,81	.025
	Person	1.46740	2,82	1.46740	2,82	.025

*p<.025

TABLE 3

Descriptive Statistics: Summary of Adjusted Sums of Squares, Effect of Status, Teach and their interaction on Behave

source of variance	Behave SS	α
Status	382.97229	.41
Teach	29.94691	
T BY S	151.65610	.16
ERROR	37.13202	
Total	935.801	

TABLE 4
Descriptive Statistics: Within-Cells Correlation With SD on Diagonal

	BEHAVE	PERSON
BEHAVE	6.089	.104
PERSON		6.778

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